Key-lecture presented at the **4. World Conference on Dialogue Among Religions and Civilisations "Migration and the challenge of Integration through dialogue between religions and cultures"** (3 – 5 November 2016 – Bitola, Republic of Macedonia), Forum of the UNESCO Chairs:

FACING THE CHALLENGE OF MIGRATION, REFUGEE CRISIS AND TERRORISM FOR THE INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE: HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

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Ladies and gentlemen,

First I would like to thank you for inviting me and giving me the opportunity to share my views on this important topic of "migration, refugee crises and terrorism as challenges for intercultural and interreligious dialogue" with you.

I feel a bit the odd man though: the programme refers to "The views of the UNESCO Chairs from SEE". However, I am not a UNESCO-chair, neither am I from this region. I am from Belgium: Brussels may be considered the "capital" of the EU, but a quick glance at the map shows it is not exactly situated in the middle of the continent but at the outer Western edge (only British Isles are more to the west, but they are "islands", "*in but not of*" Europe as Winston Churchill once observed and as the recent Brexit demonstrated once again. And on top of that, as you already could guess from the last quote, I am a historian, so I will also speak of the past, not just because that is what historians do, but because it is highly relevant.

As a historian I am well aware of the long tradition of Western Europeans to lecture everybody to the east of the Berlin – Vienna axis and that includes the rest of Europe:

The cultural historian Larry Wolff once wrote a book on the subject called *Inventing Eastern Europe* in which he showed how late Enlightenment intellectuals created a dichotomy between a presumed "enlightened" western Europe and a 'backward' Eastern Europe. To be sure these days are over: actually I believe that we in Western Europe can learn from you, as this region has a much longer history of religious diversity and living together.

The reference to the Enlightenment is relevant though, in more ways than one, as it is often invoked in discussions about contemporary migrants and asylum seekers. They too are depicted as less "enlightened" and not sharing the same values as we do. In this respect people refer to the separation between church and state, but also to gender equality and consumer culture, associated with Enlightened "individualism", although in reality Enlightened thinkers would be quite shocked by our contemporary culture and values.

Larry Wolff's study should already act as a warning: (I know this may be shocking to some, but) the Enlightenment is perhaps not the best place to find inspiration for today's problems.

One element here is certainly the enlightened predilection for simple dichotomies, such as the one between rational and irrational; pure and impure, secular and religious, public – private, …. Enlightenment thinkers indeed developed an abhorrence of hybridity or (in terms of the time) "mixing". Their depreciate view of the Balkans and Eastern Europe in general was precisely based on this rejection of the mixing of peoples, languages and religions that characterized these regions, in alleged contrast to a more homogenous and 'rational' western Europe.

A critical assessment of Wolff's observations however reveals that this multicultarlism and mixing, either in Christian lands or the Ottoman Empire, apparently did not lead to sharp conflicts or violence, on the contrary. The popular association of particularly the Balkans with deep ethnic and religious oppositions and conflict that still pops up now and then in the public perception, actually dates from later. It largely dates from the mid 19th century when the Ottoman Empire crumbled and Ottomans resorted to (west-) European-style nationalist policies of state modernization, and particularly since the Balkan Wars.

Also some other values that are usually associated with the Enlightenment and that are often referred to in contemporary debates (at least in Western Europe), are in reality ambiguous, such as religious toleration and the separation of church and state: Enlightened thinkers were not that tolerant in practice. In fact far more radical (progressive) views on tolerance and the separation of church and state had been formulated earlier in 16th c., for example by the French monk Eméric Crucé and by Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island in (then) British America. These authors did not ground there claims for religious freedom and the separation between church and state on pure pragmatic or 'rational' arguments but on theological ones, on the "divine imperative" which demanded respect for the free will and rejected any form of coercion in religious matters (actually these to some extent also influenced Enlightened arguments, although that is hardly recognized in today's perceptions either). Such arguments take religious differences serious. However, similar reasoning exist in all religious traditions, even in exclusive ones as Christianity and Islam. Arguably they hence may have more appeal than either secular arguments or lofty words about "we all celebrate the same god" – which is blatantly not the case (after all quite some in our society do not recognize god at all).

Why are these historical references important for today?

1) Historical references abound in today's rhetoric: I already referred to the uses of the Enlightenment, but also the Ottoman Empire is often invoked as a perpetual 'other' to the Christian West. In contrast to the popular perception that view is historically very dubious.

2) A second reason why these historical references are important is that we are 'victims' of our past and certainly from our perceptions of it: it offers reference scheme for our contemporary policies, either when we believe in the historical myths or when we are not aware of it, as is often the case in contemporary 'amnesiac' societies, as inevitably we base our policies on implicit understandings of the past.

3) History can be changed though: not what happened of course, but our representation of it. It hence can be used to develop different orientations (less victims of … if you engage critically).

4) History helps to explain why dealing with migrants and asylum seekers is difficult. There are of course economic and demographic factors that we should not underestimate, but I'd like to concentrate on cultural dimensions. Recent scholarship, of myself, Plilippe Buc and Michael Cook (among others) have argued that in contrast to our collective self-representation, Europe values homogeneity over diversity and hence has always found it particularly difficult to cope with religious differences.

(As I explain in my book *Imagining European Unity Since 1000 AD*) The **reasons must be looked for deep in Europe's history of Christendom**. To a large extent, though not exactly in the same way, European Christendom and its secular successors share this attitude, the Enlightenment acting as some intellectual 'go-between' translating religious attitudes into secular practices.

In this respect one could add that **Europe and the Islamic word share similar** attitudes, largely because they have similar strong and exclusive identities, which do not allow them to value of others or to organize a more harmonious society accommodating different faiths as some other religious or spiritual traditions can, such as premodern Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism.

After WW II and when the significance of the Holocaust dawned, Western Europe slowly embarked on a different path epitomized in the slogan that the EU adopted in 2000 (but it was around already since 1950) suggesting a positive appreciation of diversity. That was less the case in communist Europe. Some find here reasons to explain different attitudes, but they easily overlook that western Europe had become more homogenous than ever – it is easy to applaud the virtues of diversity if everybody looks and thinks more or less the same.

Still, since the 1960s Western Europe became considerably more diverse as a result from labour and postcolonial migrations. Religious tensions arose mainly in the 1990s though, when the economy resumed and frustrations among the left-behind grew, fueled by global developments which gave way to Islamic terrorism.

Hence I am not sure finally that Eastern and Western Europe react that differently, though one has to go to look in more detail to different attitudes between East and West today. While the positions of Hungary and Poland seem to set the tone, I am not sure that they also represent this region, for example. The same set of tensions and oppositions can be observed throughout Europe, though the discourses may not be entirely identical. But in any case the current migration crisis clearly awakens old demons and raises particular challenges. The reactions in Britain after Brexit, where hate crimes against 'foreigners' increased dramatically, illustrate my point.

What to do? There is no easy answer, and in any case it will imply serious problems. **The strategy of isolation and exclusion**, which is advocated by nationalists, quite some secularists and some religious movements, even if successful – which I believe is impossible and counterproductive in the long run – **is self-delusionary as it will provoke a return to exclusive policies that have proven their destructive power all too well**. The only way is a **policy of inclusion, but this faces a tremendous challenge of convincing local populations that migrants are not necessarily a treat** but an opportunity, even if there are serious risks which we should not neglect.

What role can religions play? Much depends on their position towards others: they may promote policies of exclusion and purity, as many have done in the past. If so, they are definitely part of the problem. The same applies for secularists, who sometimes use the present crisis to pursue secularist policies targeted against all religious expressions in the public. If, however they abandoned such policies, as most Christian churches and Islamic communities did in practice, they can play a major role both addressing migrants **as – perhaps most important – the local population**.

Despite appearances and arguments of a certain candidate for the American presidency, I believe US and Canada give some clues about possible alternatives.

In the US religion is seen as a resource, in Europe (esp. western Europe) it is viewed as a problem. Religion is a resource mainly as denominations – not only Christian, but including Judaism, Islam, Hindu associations, etcetera – give migrants a network, support, realize 'immersion' in US culture and society. It surely is not perfect, but I believe overall more effective than in Europe.

In Europe – certainly in Western Europe – religions are treated with suspicion. History incidentally shows that this is even the case with migrants sharing the same faith as the host society, as Catholic Poles and Italians experienced in equally Catholic Belgium, for example. There is little difference in the way they were represented and treated in the 1950s and Muslims, either so-called "guest workers" or today's refugees.

Canada displays similar policies as in the US, but the country is certainly even more welcoming (albeit with conditions) and very strongly focused on maintaining original culture. That can be a hindrance as well, as migrants often want to fully integrate in the host country and are often more than willing to trade in on their culture of origin. (in Quebec apparently less so: stronger emphasis on adaptation and integration/ assimilation)

Both in (English-speaking) Canada and in the US migrants keep their own culture while at the same time integrating in society.

The West-European system in contrast either amounts at isolation or requires a large degree of assimilation and particularly the acceptance of core values of the secular state and the alleged 'Enlightenment culture', as in France. This works fine for some, especially the cultural elites, but alienates and frustrates many others – that many homegrown terrorists originate from France and Belgium is not entirely coincidence, though no system will avoid radicalization of some.

The question is of course how accommodating a state, a society, can be towards religions values and practices that are at odds with those of the host society, either secular or religious.

Wim Kymlicka and Amartya Sen have argued for the attribution of polyethnic rights to minorities allowing them to retain some cultural expressions while participating in civic life, including e.g. wearing headscarves in public schools. The identity pluralism that Sen promotes may offer a more promising road to pursue, as it avoids the primary of one identity over others (be it religious or ethnic) and hence also reduces the risk of isolation and radicalization, reconciling plurality rights with the need for integration. But the question how extensive these rights, which are also cultural exemptions, can be, remains a contentious

issue. Human rights to be sure must be the bottom line, though still the application remains subject of interpretation (what with polygamy? Circumcision?, Abortion?). Moreover, as Alexander Solzhenitsyn emphasized, we cannot enjoy all our rights without impeding of those of others. These problems however can be resolved, and should be, by concertation. It is obvious that religious institutions should have a prime role in these discussions.

Here we are at the core of this conference theme: the dialogue of cultures. This brings me to my conclusion: the actual crisis is a tragedy, and leads to immense suffering. On top of that one risks bringing back Europe's thanatic self-destructing nature. With the rise of the extreme right and populist anti-asylum movements here are clearly signs that this is happening. May be the churches and religious communities can help avoiding both dangers, if they step in and reach out to the refugees, showing the compassion, charity and humity that belongs to the core of every religion, and also appeal to the population as well as secular authorities to set up a much needed dialogue. What we need to avoid at all cost, is that communities, so called "home communities", national minorities or migrants, established or new, become frustrated and isolated from mainstream society. That requires efforts from all sides. But frustration, more than economic deprivation, creates terrorists. Without dialogue, we are digging our own grave as much as that of others.

Thank you.